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Museum Anthropology and Imperial Networks as Cultural Status: The Colonial Ethnology Museum in Nineteenth Century Melbourne

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The discovery of a datable prehistory was an epochal transformation in nineteenth-century thought. It validated the idea of progressive development, one of the long-held tenets of western thought. In a temporal and geographical disjuncture, key writers such as John Lubbock fused the evidence of a prehistoric Europe to the ethnographic present, thereby framing indigenous peoples as the primitives that time forgot. Colonial ethnographic museums operated within this worldview. Yet they had their own local idiosyncrasies within this metanarrative that reflected settler aspirations to transform the colonial periphery into a cultural centre within an imperial framework. The trustees for the ethnographic collection in the Melbourne Public Library (now housed in Museum Victoria) saw its purpose as “illustrating the historic development of art, commencing with a few of the most striking productions of Nineveh, Egypt and Etruria, to proceed through the Grecian Schools and through early medieval and late Italian eras to modern times”.¹ Yet beyond a few tourist trinkets from Pompeii and plaster reproductions of Greek and Roman sculpture, its collections on the development of Western culture were scant. The attention soon moved to the haphazardly collected Aboriginal and Oceanic curios. These curios became the kernel of this museum and through exchanges a source of its expansion into European and global prehistory. The desire to create an ethnographic collection, however, reflects on the trustees’ desires to have Melbourne seen as a cultural centre within the British Empire. Consequently the desire for status emanating from a collection was more than a desire to understand the cultures they were collecting.

Chris Gosden has argued that ethnographic museums “emerge[d] through thousands of relationships”; these relationships were global networks of exchanges.² Nineteenth-century museums were about knowing people through things, but relationships of acquisition were predominantly colonial in structure. Drawing on this fact, Mackenzie observes that museums “symbolised the networks, the support systems, and the skewing of administrative and legal provisions in the direction of the enthusiasms of the dominant people”.³ In addition to being the ideological legitimisation of empire, museums were tangible reflections of imperial networks. These networks speak to the role of the centre and periphery in the collecting relationships that constructed museum collections. Although well developed in the history of science, the role of networks as a system of organisation is an emerging area of research in the history of the British Empire.⁴ Sheets-Peterson has observed that colonial museums collected information

¹ *Public Library Trustees Minutes* July 1853-Feb 1870, State Library of Victoria, MS 12855: MSF vol13a, 24 May 1859, p. 42.

² Chris Gosden, Frances Larson and Alison Petch, *Knowing Things: Exploring the Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum, 1884-1945* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 5; Amiria J. M. Henare, *Museums, Anthropology and Imperial Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects : Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

³ Mackenzie, *Museums and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 4.

⁴ Zoë Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections 1815-45: Patronage, the Information Revolution and Colonial Government* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

on the local environment, but the advocates of colonial museums (particularly in Melbourne) also aimed for global collections that included collections from the metropole.⁵

Despite its eager beginnings in 1859, the international ethnographic collection languished until 1884 when Stephen Thompson, the curator of the Art Museum, proposed a plan to develop the collection through exchanges with museums and prominent individuals in Britain.⁶ Thompson was interested in “ancient art” and argued that “art” was an “organic growth” and that all indo-European art movements were linked and not “separate isolated development[s]”.⁷ In this regard, he saw archaeology as a methodology for understanding the history and unity of ancient art and its links to the classical period. During the winter of 1883 Thompson presented a lecture series on ancient art, beginning with prehistoric Europe and concluding with the fall of the Roman Empire. From the reports of the lectures in the *Argus*, it appears that Thompson did not use indigenous Australian material to illustrate his arguments on prehistoric Europe. Nevertheless, his exchange proposal relied on connecting European prehistory to Aboriginal material culture.

In 1885, Thompson’s overtures paid off, with John Lubbock, one of the leading patrons of British archaeology and ethnology, writing to Thompson proposing an exchange of “modern savage implements for thirty three specimens of weapons of the pre-historic age”.⁸ This communication reflected a central part of Lubbock’s work. He believed that a “knowledge of modern savages and their modes of life enables us more accurately to picture, and more vividly to conceive, the manners and customs of our ancestors in bygone ages”.⁹

The collection that Lubbock sent was representative of global prehistory. The collection included implements and flakes from England, Belgium, Denmark, North America, the West Indies, Egypt, and India (although the locations are in present-day Pakistan). The “representative collection” related to Lubbock’s book *Pre-historic Times*, being samples of the types illustrated in his book. Although Lubbock proposed an exchange, the collection is registered as a donation, and I can find no reference to anything being sent to Lubbock in return.¹⁰ Presumably, Lubbock would have received Victorian stone tools in return. Thompson was dismissed from his post later that year after a long-running dispute with a colleague and accusations of impropriety; therefore, it is also possible that Lubbock never received an exchange. Nevertheless, the relationship continued. Edward Langton, a former treasurer for the colony, free trade politician, and vice-president of the Board of Trustees for the Public Library Museums and National

⁵ Susan Sheets-Pyenson, *Cathedrals of Science: The Development of Colonial Natural History Museums During the Late Nineteenth Century* (Kingston, Ont.: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), p. 93.

⁶ *National Gallery of Victoria Minutes*, MS 12855: MSF vol. 57, 22 May 1884, p. 41.

⁷ Stephen Thompson, ‘Ancient Art’, *The Argus*, 29 June 1883, p. 6.

⁸ *NGV Minutes*, MS 12855: MSF vol. 57 19 Feb 1885, p. 71.

⁹ Sir John Lubbock, *The origin of civilisation and the Primitive Condition of Man, Mental and Social Condition of Savages* (D. Appleton and Company: New York, 1871) p. v.

¹⁰ Thompson was dismissed after a long running dispute with the Director of the School of Drawing, Mr Folingsby. The dispute was over who was in charge of the NGV. see *NGV Minutes*, MS 12855: MSF vol. 57.

Gallery, approached Lubbock in a personal letter in May 1891, commenting on the importance of Lubbock's contribution and history of the collection in Melbourne:

The greater part of the objects we now have we are indebted to you. One or more have been presented by Dr Evans of the British Museum and a local donor has given a few more. But the collection is still very small, and the trustees are most anxious to make it fairly representative of the bronze as well as of the proceeding periods.¹¹

At this stage, the collection of objects from prehistory consisted of, at best, 50 stone tools — 33 of which Lubbock donated in 1885. These objects however represented global prehistory and included North American stone tools, which were undated and may have been recent in their creation. What is interesting about Langton's account is the fact that he did not confuse European prehistory with Australian Aboriginal material culture. His account of the institution's collections does not suggest the use of Aboriginal material to represent ancient European culture. This was the opposite of Lubbock's approach.

In his formal letter of request, Langton gave an indication of why the trustees wanted these objects, writing to Lubbock "you may not be unwilling in the interests of science to aid them in making the collection more worthy of this colony which has made such rapid progress since the year 1885". Although Langton expresses the importance of these objects to science, he did not outline why the colony needed these objects for science. Instead the Trustees wanted them because they represented the latest science, therefore Langton's real focus was the prestige of the colony of Victoria. He also recognised that there was a lack of experts able to interpret the tools within the colony, maintaining: "It will be of the greatest importance that any specimens, which you may obtain, shall be accurately and fully described in order that there may be no difficulty here in arranging or classifying them".¹² In this respect the scientific achievement of the discovery of the past is being overlaid with, and made able to represent, the stadial development of western society. Implicit in this overlaying is a statement about modernity, social development and the colony's progress as a cultural centre.

Although Langton saw the acquisition of the prehistoric collection as a mark of the colony's cultural maturity, this maturity only found form within the context of the British Empire and relied on personalised networks within it. Lubbock provides a great example, with Langton reminding Lubbock of their time together on the "committee of public accounts". The Trustees offered the collection and an additional £300 to Lubbock, and requested his good graces to negotiate whatever deal he believed was fitting. The Trustees were acknowledging that they had few connections within the British anthropological and archaeological establishment, and therefore hoped Lubbock could use his personal connections to facilitate the deal.

¹¹ Edward Langton to Sir John Lubbock, personal letter, 5 May 1891, British Museum, Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas Archive, Christy Correspondence, File 826.

¹² Edward Langton to Sir John Lubbock, official letter, 5 May 1891, British Museum, Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas Archive, Christy Correspondence, File 826.

The collections also reveal layers of interwoven personal political connections. The objects sent to Lubbock present a snapshot of holdings from Australia, New Guinea and the Pacific. The Victorian material originally belonged to Robert Brough Smyth, the Secretary of the Aboriginal Protection Board. The nucleus of Smyth's collection was inherited from William Thomas, the Protector of Aborigines. In addition, John Forrest, the Premier of Western Australia, gathered most of the other Australian material through the agency of the Western Australian Police. Smyth, Thomas, and Forrest all used their political positions to procure objects from indigenous people and other government officials. In each of these instances, the collections were formed partly with the belief that an ethnographic collection was an important cultural achievement and mark of cultural development. Nevertheless, they were also acquired through expressions of colonial power.

The New Guinea collections sent to Lubbock were equally a statement by the Trustees of colonial cultural advancement. Most of the New Guinea objects were collected from the Fly River region as part of Victorian support for the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia's (RGSA) 1885 expedition to New Guinea. This expedition was established in competition to Henry Forbes's Royal Geographical Society (RGS) expedition to the Owen Stanley Ranges. The RGSA's expedition was part of claims by the Australian colonies to New Guinea. The interests behind these claims were different from British colonial interests, a point recognised by the RGS's decision not to cooperate with the Australasian expedition.¹³ Once the expedition returned to Sydney, the RGSA displayed the collection of "curios" to "show the public that the expedition" had "done really good work". Critics at the time pointed out that, besides for travelling up the Fly River, the goals of the expedition were very ambiguous.¹⁴ One critic sarcastically commented, "has no other formation been discovered by the expedition than the alluvial soil of the river banks?".¹⁵ After the initial exhibition in Sydney, the collection was shared between the various contributing colonies.¹⁶ The objects therefore were part of the Australian colonies' imperial designs. Although existing within the British imperial framework, the aims of Australian colonies reflected a desire for Australasian imperial glory. This was subtly different from British imperial glory.

There was also an assumption by the Trustees that similar expeditions would continue into the future, with Langton confidently proclaiming: "So far as Australasia and the South Sea Islands generally are concerned our Museum possesses a very complete collection of ethnological specimens and [can] render any assistance... in endeavouring to obtain South Sea Island specimens such as you may desire".¹⁷ It is interesting to note that at this time, Langton's confidence reflected the reality that it was easier to procure Melanesian objects from the Pacific than Australian objects from the outback interior.

¹³ "The Royal Geographical Society", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 Jan 1884, p.7.

¹⁴ "Editorial", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 June 1885, p. 11.

¹⁵ Inquirer, "The Practical Results of the New Guinea Expedition", *The Argus*, 29 Dec 1885, p. 7.

¹⁶ *The Argus*, 14 Dec 1885, p. 5.

¹⁷ Edward Langton to Sir John Lubbock, official letter, 5 May 1891, British Museum, Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas Archive, Christy Correspondence, File 826.

Another important Trustee with good connections was George Verdon, who had also served as Treasurer in a number of colonial governments in the late 1850s and 1860s. In 1868, he became Victoria's first Agent-General in London and was named as a Trustee of the Public Library, Museums, and Gallery on his return. By 1878, he was a powerful Trustee serving on a number of committees and actively involved in collection procurement. As Agent-General, Verdon worked the imperial networks and represented Victorian interests. He applied this same skill to negotiating the procurement of collections. Verdon had an active interest in ethnology, with the gallery committee often referring decisions to purchase ethnographic and curio collections according to his judgment. By the 1890s, Verdon had invested over twenty years in supporting a public ethnographic collection. It was during this period that Verdon negotiated the acquisition of two substantial ethnographic and prehistoric collections.

The first was a collection of indigenous material culture from South Africa. The decision to purchase the collection was made in November 1889 when the Governor of Victoria, Sir Henry Loch, was made Governor of South Africa. On his departure for South Africa, the Trustees asked him to "be so good as to obtain specimens of native implements, weapons, etc in South Africa", with £250 being voted for the purpose of procurement.¹⁸ According to the original register, this collection was "obtained by Sir H. R. Loch through Sir George Verdon".¹⁹ The collection consisted of 417 objects, of which most of the material was either clubs or spears.²⁰ Loch used a network of regional officials to procure objects directly from the tribal groups in Southern Africa. Rev J. S. Moffat was one such collector. Moffat, who had negotiated a peace treaty with King Lobengula Khumalo of the Ndebele (Matabela) tribe in 1888, procured the Ndebele component of the collection. Moffat despatched the collection in July 1891, three years after the peace treaty and two years before the treaty broke-down and war ensued between the settlers and the Ndebele. The exchange of objects between Lobengula and Moffat is an example of the use of material culture as objects of diplomacy within the colonial encounter. Once acquired these particular objects were despatch to Melbourne and went on display a year before war broke out in Metabelaland. These objects came to symbolise the expanse of the British Empire and Melbourne's cultural importance within that empire.

In 1890, Verdon went to Britain to negotiate gallery purchases, including a review of the deal established by Lubbock between the British Museum and the Colony of Victoria. Verdon aimed to replicate the British Museum holdings in Melbourne. Back in Melbourne, the Trustees for the Public Library, Museum and Gallery had refashioned the institution to replicate the British Museum of 1881.²¹ Verdon's trip furthered this aim and was as much a fact-finding tour as a procurement mission, as he states: "I gave all the time I could spare to the British Museum" to gain information "useful to the Trustees

¹⁸ *NGV Minutes*, MS 12855: MSF vol. 55, 27 Nov 1889, p. 218.

¹⁹ Note on the original Register, see: Museum of Victoria, *Ethnographic Stock Book 3*, Indigenous Cultures Department, p. 189.

²⁰ Clubs, 22; Spears, 92; Shields, 8; Female clothing, 92+

²¹ *NGV Minutes*, MS 12855: MSF vol. 58, 23 March 1881, p. 307-308

in building and furnishing the new galleries”.²² He engaged in extensive discussions on museology with Maunde Thompson, Director of the British Museum. As part of these discussions he got Thompson to agree to copy any new Egyptian reliefs received by the British Museum and forward them to Victoria. Verdon also met August Franks, keeper of Oriental and European Art, and the archaeologist Arthur Evans, who was a trustee. Franks sold 274 prehistoric European implements to Victoria, whilst Evans donated four stone tools from the Cave of St. Archeul, which was the excavation that established the existence of the Stone Age in Europe.²³ In addition, Verdon also purchased “a fine specimen of African goldsmiths’ work which formed part of the ransom paid to the British Government by the King as Asante, and which was in his [Evans’] collection”.²⁴ In each respect, Verdon aimed to gain an essence of the British Museum for Melbourne. He wanted to replicate a metropolitan centre on the periphery.

The nineteenth century ethnology collection now housed in Museum Victoria is a window into the cultural aspirations of the nineteenth century Trustees for the Public Library Museums and National Gallery. The collections came from across the British Empire and were acquired for their perceived “scientific value”. Nevertheless, their actual “scientific value” was never demonstrated. They were valued as statements of scientific intent rather than reflecting any genuine research occurring within the colony. In this respect, the collection reflected the cultural aspirations of leading patrons. These patrons were intrinsically connected to the political networks of the British Empire. These networks were tools of patronage and power built out of exploration and conquest. The collection therefore represented the aspirations of empire more than an attempt to understand the cultures whose objects were being collected or excavated.

²² George Verdon, *Report by the Honourable Sir George Verdon, K.C.M.G., C.G, F.R.S., &c. &c. on Matters Undertaken on Behalf of the Trustees of the Public Library, Museums, and National Gallery of Victoria During His Recent Visit to Europe* (Edgerton and Moore: Melbourne, 1890) pp. 1-4, pasted into Public Library Trustees Minutes, State Library of Victoria, MS 12855: MSF vol. 13a, p 173-174, p. 1.

²³ British Museum, Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas Archive, Christy correspondence, file 826.

²⁴ George Verdon, *Report*, p. 4.